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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 61/18 and Security Council resolution 1746 (2007). It reviews the activities of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) since my previous report, dated 15 March 2007 (A/61/799-S/2007/152). During the reporting period, the Council also received an oral briefing on the situation in Afghanistan on 23 May 2007 (see S/PV.5680).

II. Overview

A. Political developments

2. The political transition that began with the signing of the Bonn Agreement nearly six years ago has come under growing internal and external pressure. While certain institutions and ministries continue to mature, public confidence in the Government and its leaders is wavering owing to increasing corruption and weak governance, particularly at the subnational level. An intensifying Taliban-led insurgency that increasingly relies on suicide bombing and other terrorist tactics is undermining confidence in the future and denying access of the Government and international aid organizations to a growing number of districts. Despite these pressures, there has been progress in terms of economic growth, education, health, road building and rural development. Furthermore, international support for Afghanistan has intensified rather than wavered. Progress, at this key moment, will depend on the international community and the Government of Afghanistan better coordinating their efforts to defeat the insurgency, promote good governance and provide tangible improvements to the lives of Afghans.

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3. All of this must be achieved at a time when strains have emerged in the Afghan coalition that supported the Bonn Agreement and the Afghanistan Compact. The National Front of Afghanistan, a new alliance of former members of the Northern Alliance with representatives of the former Communist Government and the royal family, has become a prominent voice critical of Government shortcomings. While the emergence of an institutionalized political opposition will be a healthy development in the long term, it remains vital for Afghanistan to avoid a fragmentation of power in the short term, especially if that fragmentation weakens the political consensus that has underpinned the successful implementation of the Bonn Agreement.

4. On a more positive note, at the regional level, a collaborative atmosphere has begun to prevail in Afghan-Pakistani relations as the common challenge of terrorism has come into focus on both sides of the border. With regard to the international level, since March my Special Representative has travelled to capitals to promote the importance of a coherent approach to Afghanistan, amid a groundswell of political, financial and diplomatic support for the country. The increased support for Afghanistan underscores the urgent need for an integrated political and military strategy that complements the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, but also encompasses wider issues and provides a sharper focus on the achievement of national reconciliation and regional stability.

B. Security situation

5. Although the expanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the increasingly capable Afghan National Army have accrued multiple military successes during the reporting period, the Taliban and affiliated insurgent groups continue to prevent the attainment of full security in a number of areas. Access to rural areas of south and south-eastern Afghanistan for official and civil society actors has continued to decline. The boldness and frequency of suicide bombings, ambushes and direct fire attacks have increased.

6. Following counter-insurgency operations in the south and east, the Taliban have lost a significant number of senior and mid-level commanders. In Hilmand, Kunar, Paktya and Uruzgan Provinces, insurgent leaders have been forced to put foreigners in command positions, further undermining the limited local bases of support. This has heightened the importance to the Taliban of the support it receives from the border regions of Pakistan.

7. Rates of insurgent and terrorist violence are at least 20 per cent higher than in 2006; an average of 548 incidents per month were recorded in 2007, compared to an average of 425 per month in 2006. There have been over 100 suicide attacks to date in 2007, compared to 123 in all of 2006. While 76 per cent of all suicide missions target international military and Afghan security forces, their victims have been largely civilian bystanders: 143 civilians lost their lives to suicide attacks between 1 January and 31 August 2007. Suicide attacks have been accompanied by attacks against students and schools, assassinations of officials, elders and mullahs, and the targeting of police, in a deliberate and calculated effort to impede the establishment of legitimate Government institutions and to undermine popular confidence in the authority and capability of the Government of Afghanistan.

8. Defeating the insurgency has been complicated by the growth of criminal and drug gangs, which enjoy a symbiotic relationship with anti-Government armed groups. While these groups may not share the political goals of the Taliban, they do have a common interest in preventing the imposition of State authority in certain areas or corrupting what State authority exists. In the poppy-cultivating Provinces of Badakhshan, Hilmand and Kandahar, the State is extremely weak or non-existent throughout much of the countryside, while corruption is endemic in provincial centres.

9. The successes of the counter-insurgency in conventional battles and in eliminating Taliban and other insurgent leaders are undeniable. If the trends of the past two years are to be reversed, however, a more comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy will be needed to reinforce political outreach to disaffected groups and address the security gaps that allow insurgents to recover from their losses and, with very few resources, still manage to terrorize local populations or enlist criminal gangs to further their goals.

C. Institutional challenges

10. While some institutions within the judicial, executive and legislative branches of Government continue to gain capacity and effectiveness, internal disputes and institutional corruption threaten efforts to consolidate and legitimize these institutions. The Anti-Corruption Commission established by President Karzai has not yet delivered results and faces an uncertain future. The resulting sense of impunity has encouraged a culture of patronage and direct involvement in illegal activities, including the drug trade, especially within the police force.

11. Relentless pressure from the international community has resulted in the removal of some prominent human rights offenders from positions in the Ministry of the Interior and their replacement by more professional officers. The lack of alignment among the international partners involved in reforming the Ministry, however, has contributed to a notable failure to prevent or curb the use of parochial connections and bribes to determine appointments. Tolerance of corruption has had a particularly corrosive effect on the police. Since many communities' only contact with the national Government is through the police, poor police behaviour often translates into a negative perception of the Government and, to some degree, the international community that supports it.

12. The Office of the Attorney General has attempted a proactive strategy to combat corruption by arresting, investigating and prosecuting medium- and high-level Government officials, as well as some of its own prosecutors. These efforts are frustrated, however, by the fact that those targeted are often able to defend themselves through their personal relationships with powerful figures. Police or justice officials are commonly bribed to prevent arrests, arrange releases from detention or dismiss charges. Sentences, when they are imposed, tend to be lenient. Furthermore, there have been no substantial successes in the restitution or forfeiture of the proceeds from corruption-related crimes.

13. Another measure to combat corruption is the creation of a professional and adequately paid civil service. The Action Plan on Peace, Reconciliation and Justice, adopted as part of the Afghanistan Compact, calls for the Government of Afghanistan to establish a clear and transparent national appointments mechanism

for all senior-level appointments. Progress on this front has been inadequate. The senior appointments panel created for this purpose still has no approved rules of procedure that guarantee transparency and impartiality. In addition, it has not been provided with premises and is, in general, under-resourced and underperforming.

14. For lower level appointments, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission has finalized a revised public administration reform framework and implementation programme. This effort has been underpinned by a more coordinated approach among donors. The Cabinet, after much deliberation, approved a pay and grading reform, with a salary range of $80 to $650 per month for civil servants. Implementation, however, will be incremental over a four-year period, meaning that it is unlikely to have a significant effect on reducing corruption in the immediate term.

15. Finally, in August 2007, the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House) approved the United Nations Convention against Corruption. United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), are providing technical assistance to develop legislation, strategies and capacity to implement the provisions of the Convention.

III. Key political developments

A. National Assembly, political parties and elections

16. During the reporting period, the National Assembly managed to approve the national budget, as well as important legislation supportive of the Afghanistan Compact, including the review and adoption of the Wolesi Jirga internal rules of procedure, the Advocates Law and the Media Law, all of which now are awaiting review by the Meshrano Jirga (Upper House). In addition, parliamentary commissions have been engaged with key security sector reform issues, including police reform and the international military presence. The coordinated work of UNAMA and other organizations with the Wolesi Jirga resulted in a relatively progressive Media Law being submitted to the Meshrano Jirga. However, subsequent amendments in the Meshrano Jirga threaten to give excessive control to the Ministry of Culture and Information and are already undermining principles of free speech as enshrined in the Constitution of Afghanistan.

17. These accomplishments have been marred by questionable voting practices and a tendency towards political posturing. A number of parliamentary decisions, including the attempt to dismiss the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and for Refugees, have strained relations between the legislative and the executive branches.

18. In April 2007, a new political alliance, the National Front of Afghanistan, was launched in Kabul. The Front is composed of former jihadi leaders affiliated with the Northern Alliance/Shura-i-Nazar, former members of the Communist party, Junbesh members and a member of the royal family. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former President of Afghanistan and the head of the jihadi Jamiat-i-Islami party, was elected leader of the Front for a six-month period. The Front did not present itself officially as an opposition party, but its leadership announced that the once rival factions had united largely in response to the current political situation and growing concerns for the future. It felt that Government weakness, significant patronage and

administrative corruption were contributing to the rapid deterioration of the State's capacity and legitimacy. Among the most significant reforms proposed by the Front is a constitutional amendment to replace the current presidential system with a parliamentary one.

19. A crucial upcoming debate in the National Assembly will be over the draft electoral law and an accompanying law to reform the Independent Electoral Commission. The five-year presidential and parliamentary terms expire in 2009 and 2010, respectively. In May 2007, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board of the Afghanistan Compact recommended that the Government and National Assembly should ensure timely adoption by the National Assembly of an electoral law that would allow cost-effective and secure elections, as called for by the Afghanistan Compact. Draft laws on the electoral system and the Commission are under consideration; given the importance of these laws for members of parliament, they may be hotly debated. In the meantime, a civil/voter registry pilot project, now being implemented by UNDP in cooperation with the Commission, will provide recommendations on how to produce a voter registry and identification documents in time for the next elections. The challenges ahead are immense. Since the parliamentary elections in 2005, the Commission has received extremely limited support, owing in part to the financial deficit from the parliamentary elections, which has deterred donors from contributing to electoral projects. The Commission will need a great deal more attention and resources if it is to play a meaningful role in organizing the next elections. In the light of the time required in the past to organize voter registration and elections in Afghanistan, providing this support is now becoming a matter of urgency.

B. Provincial developments

20. Provincial governments are the main nodes through which the authority of the central Government is transmitted across the national territory. Centre-province relations are strained in many areas, however, as provincial officials often feel neglected or even undermined by the central Government. In July and August 2007, a series of subnational consultations began in each province with the goal of ensuring that provincial priorities inform the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. This was the first time that representatives of government and the community at the provincial level were able to interact with central Government officials at the ministerial level to present their development priorities. UNAMA played a key role in both the logistics of these consultations and coordinating United Nations agency input and providing technical assistance. The UNAMA regional and provincial offices also worked to promote the participation of women and minorities who, in general, were well represented. Provincial councils played a prominent role, with female members taking the floor to champion women's participation and discuss sensitive issues, such as police performance and corruption.

21. While these consultations were a well-conceived and well-executed effort to connect the centre to the provinces, the central Government's continuing reliance on ethnic and tribal factors rather than merit to appoint provincial administrators has had a far more serious impact on regional development. Individuals who align themselves with key figures in the President's administration are frequently able to determine appointments, empowering selected ethnic or tribal networks in their provinces of origin. This practice has generated resentment towards the central

Government by those who have been disempowered, while the appointment of tribal notables rather than proven administrators has impeded the development of good governance.

22. The role of provincial councils has varied from province to province. Weaknesses are due mainly to a lack of capacity and clarity of their role relative to that of the central Government. In March 2007, the provincial council law was amended to endow the councils with a monitoring role as well as an advisory one, but this distinction remains unclear in practice. According to the Constitution, provincial council elections should also be held in 2009; for the elections to be meaningful, however, much more attention must be paid to the institutions of provincial governance.

23. Challenges to development, particularly in the south, south-east and east, are closely linked to the increased insecurity. As the character of provincial reconstruction teams is determined by individual nations and the disparity of funds available to them, the activities of the teams are not always aligned with the benchmarks and timelines of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. The increased field presence of UNAMA has allowed engagement with the teams to address these inconsistencies and ensure that all teams achieve a common understanding and approach to the Strategy, in cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan.

24. The failure of development actors to ensure that quieter provinces in the north and west receive a tangible peace dividend has played into the latent north-south fault line within Afghanistan. This is further exacerbated by the perception that provinces that grow poppies, mainly in the south and east, are actually being rewarded with an inordinate share of development assistance. To offset this perception, resources continue to be committed to the Good Performers Initiative fund ($22.5 million for 2006-2007), which rewards each province that does not grow poppies with $500,000 for development assistance.

25. All UNAMA field offices, including the two recently opened provincial offices in Ghor and Day Kundi, continue to engage in outreach, mediation and conflict-prevention activities with ethnic and political factions. UNAMA also continues to facilitate dialogue between the central authorities and those groups most estranged from government. This has been most notable in the south-east, where, despite deteriorating security conditions, UNAMA continues to assist Government efforts to bring alienated tribes into closer contact with the central Government.

C. Regional environment

26. Tensions in the crucial relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan eased during the reporting period. This easing of tension was due in part to the increasing recognition that the challenge of terrorism was a shared one that would require shared responses, and that neither country could afford to lose control of its respective border areas. At the conclusion of the Ankara summit hosted by the President of Turkey on 29 and 30 April, Presidents Karzai and Musharraf signed a declaration in which they reaffirmed their commitment to work together on a range of topics and to form a joint working group to monitor progress in a number of issues, including the facilitation of orderly repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan.

27. The joint declaration produced at the four-day Afghanistan-Pakistan peace jirga held in August in Kabul was an important confidence-building measure between the two countries and the communities on both sides of the border. Both sides identified the need to address jointly a broad range of common problems, beginning with terrorism. President Musharraf recognized the support for Taliban activities inside Afghanistan provided from parts of the border regions of Pakistan. Jirga participants focused on the need to isolate foreign elements in order for both countries to pursue the common cause of regional stability and improved prosperity through the development of trade routes. The implementation and monitoring of the commitments contained in the declaration will be the responsibility of a permanent 50-member joint peace jirga commission, which will meet every two months. The next joint jirga, due to be held in Islamabad, will probably take place after elections in Pakistan.

28. On 14 August, following the visit to Kabul of President Ahmedinejad of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran signed a general agreement on bilateral cooperation and on capacity-building of Afghan ministries. In addition, the two Governments began discussing a mechanism for the issuance of work visas for Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran, an issue that has strained relations between the two countries since the recent deportation of Afghan workers from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

29. Afghanistan formally acceded to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, at its fourteenth summit, held in New Delhi on 3 and 4 April 2007. At the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Bishkek on 16 August, all participants (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan) voiced strong support for Afghanistan and focused on identifying practical measures to implement international programmes aimed at boosting the country's economy (China announced an additional 80 million yuan of development assistance), controlling security and the drug-trafficking situation.

IV. Security sector and rule of law

A. Afghan security forces

Afghan National Army

30. The Afghan National Army has a current strength of around 40,360 troops, of which approximately 22,000 are consistently present for combat duty. The Afghanistan Compact calls for a target of 70,000 troops by 2010. A formalized leave, training and deployment cycle, together with a pay increase, have improved the retention of trained forces, although the strain of continual commitment to the intense pace of operations continues to contribute to desertions. Increased training and mentoring has improved the army's capacity to plan and conduct joint operations with coalition forces and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/ISAF. Regular participation by the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Directorate for Security in coordination and intelligence-sharing meetings indicates a maturing of the national security architecture.

Afghan National Police

31. The development of the Afghan National Police has lagged behind that of the army; for this reason, additional measures have recently been taken to improve its performance. On 1 May, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board decided to increase the target force size of the police to 82,000. This newly authorized strength also includes 18,000 for the Afghan Border Police, 4,995 for the Afghanistan National Civil Order Police and 11,271 for the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (A/61/799-S/2007/152, para. 27). The resilience of the insurgency has highlighted the need for a police force with a gendarmerie component that is able to impose order and that complements the civilian police force that enforces the law and detects crimes.

32. Another important initiative to accelerate efforts to create a viable police force was the launch of the European Police Mission in Afghanistan on 17 June. A total of 21 countries, including the non-European Union countries Canada, Croatia, Norway and Turkey, are participating in the mission. As already noted, serious problems remain with the performance of the police, many of whose members are involved in the sale of commissions and other forms of corruption, including direct involvement in narcotics trafficking. On the ground, respect for authority and elementary discipline have not yet been instilled, and the actions of the police within communities often inspire more fear than confidence in the people. In insurgency-affected areas, the police have therefore not been able to ensure security, even in areas where militants had been cleared following military operations. This crucial link between institutionalized corruption in the ministry and the consequent inability to realize the full gains of counter-insurgency actions needs to be more fully recognized and addressed.

B. International forces and civil/military coordination

International forces

33. NATO/ISAF forces have grown from 18,500 in July 2006 to 39,500 currently, with troops from 37 countries. The coalition forces led by the United States of America in Operation Enduring Freedom and the Combined Strategic Transition Command-Afghanistan now number close to 10,000. In the past six months, the focus of the ISAF effort has shifted from the south to the east in response to infiltration and in order to improve overall security. Sustaining the security effect created by these operations relies, however, on capable Afghan national security forces, and on the Afghan National Police in particular, which are currently inadequate in both number and professionalism.

34. During the reporting period, the United States command of ISAF improved coordination between Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF operations. Nonetheless, the inherent dangers of two forces operating in the same battle space with different mandates requires more proactive coordination to ensure success of the ISAF mission.

Civil military coordination

35. The main forum for civil/military coordination at the national level is the Policy Action Group (A/61/799-S/2007/152, para. 9). The Group has become a

valuable instrument for the coordination of Afghan and international military forces at the tactical level. Nonetheless, despite the improvements in this area (see para. 30 above) the limited scope of Afghan participation in Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF strategic planning inhibits transmission of valuable political guidance from the host nation.

36. During the reporting period, UNAMA increased high-level dialogue with the ISAF senior leadership, laying the groundwork for the development of an integrated political-military approach in Afghanistan. Complementing this, UNAMA participated in civil-military working groups, NATO conferences, ISAF training and provincial reconstruction team workshops in Afghanistan and abroad. Increased awareness of the Mission's role among incoming military staff has ensured that reconstruction teams seek political guidance, humanitarian expertise and coordination assistance from UNAMA field offices.

C. Rule of law

37. The Supreme Court, the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Attorney General continue to experience an enormous deficit of resources (human and financial) and infrastructure. The targeting of justice officials, demonstrated recently by the deliberate killing of four judges in Ghazni in August, makes it difficult to recruit, deploy and retain justice officials in areas where they are most needed. Low salaries (an average of $60 per month for prosecutors and $100 per month for judges) foster corruption, which undermines public trust in the judicial system. Non-transparent processes for appointments and career advancement, in addition to the lack of effective mechanisms for accountability and discipline to enforce ethical codes of conduct, also need to be addressed.

38. In recognition of the need to address these problems, the Conference on Rule of Law in Afghanistan was held in Rome on 2 and 3 July 2007, which I attended together with President Karzai. The Conference was co-hosted by the Government of Italy, the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations, and included high-level delegates from 24 countries. Consensus was reached on the need for a national justice programme and the development of a sector strategy with an Afghan-led monitoring and evaluation system overseen by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board. Donors also committed to the establishment of a coordination mechanism at the provincial level and dedicated a total of $360 million to justice reform and the rule of law over a period of five years. Following the Rome conference, a joint donor-Government implementation plan is due to be presented in Kabul in October 2007.

D. Counter-narcotics

39. The UNODC annual survey on Afghanistan, released late in August 2007, reported an increase in opium poppy cultivation by 17 per cent and potential opium production of 34 per cent. The implementation of the national drug control strategy has clearly been unsatisfactory, especially in the south-west and the south, particularly in Hilmand, and in the eastern Province of Nangarhar, which experienced the highest increases.

40. The unprecedented increase in opium production in 2007 poses a grave threat to reconstruction and nation-building in Afghanistan. A two-pronged strategy is needed. The people of the provinces that have become, or are on the brink of becoming, free of opium cultivation should be rewarded by enhanced development assistance. On the other hand, provinces with expanding opium crops will have to be confronted with the consequences of violating national laws and generating resources for insurgents. The international community, drawing on the expertise of UNODC, should rally behind truly Afghan-led efforts aimed at curbing the drug problem though the development of the countryside, the promotion of the rule of law and the achievement of high standards of governance.

41. The increase in poppy cultivation and heroin production in Afghanistan has encouraged alliances of convenience between narco-interests and insurgents. Following the harvest season, from April to July, for a percentage of the profits, insurgents provided security for traffickers, while Government officials, including police, made tacit non-intervention agreements that allowed the free movement of chemical precursors and heroin across the borders of Afghanistan. A trilateral agreement signed by Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan in June 2007 committed the countries to carry out more joint border operations and to increase information-sharing. Nonetheless, the financial power of narco-interests, both in Afghanistan and in the neighbouring States through which the contraband is smuggled, is such that they have so far been able to effectively counter Government and international efforts to stem or stop the illegal trade.

E. Disbandment of illegal armed groups

42. Renewed momentum behind the project for the disbandment of illegal armed groups was evident in the progress of the district disarmament initiative, which has led to the collection of 798 weapons since its launch on 19 April. Tenders for assessed development projects to reward compliance are being issued. However, resistance has been observed in the north-east, north and west, where unverified reports of weapons distribution by commanders have increased in recent months, as previously reported (A/61/799-S/2007/152, para. 23). Some reports suggest that the ongoing viability of the Taliban as a military movement has caused commanders to hold on to their weapons in case the Government is defeated by the Taliban and the extremist group again tries to impose itself on the entire country.

43. A conference on the disbandment of illegal armed groups was held in Tokyo on 21 June 2007, co-chaired by Japan, Afghanistan and UNAMA. Participants agreed on the need to secure personnel, infrastructure and equipment, as well as a budget that would enable the disbandment unit recently established by the Ministry of the Interior to function in a sustainable and independent manner. The conference focused on the need to coordinate disbandment, police reform and counter-narcotics, the de-registering of political parties linked to illegal armed groups and the disqualification of parliamentarians maintaining armed factions or groups.

V. Human rights

A. Human rights and gender

Human rights

44. The worsening security conditions and the absence of a consistent rule of law, described above, have had a negative effect on the enjoyment of human rights in Afghanistan, especially the right to life and security, free movement, access to education and health and access to livelihood by communities.

45. The problems in the judiciary, also described above, have been confirmed by the Mission's monitoring of the legal system. In particular, UNAMA has observed chronic judiciary understaffing, corruption and abuse of power leading to violations of due process. UNAMA and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission continue to receive and verify complaints of illegal and arbitrary detention, where pretrial detention timelines are breached, suspects are not given defence counsel and ill-treatment and torture are used to force confessions. Very few of those whose rights have been abused are given access to redress mechanisms; this is disproportionately true for women. Furthermore, UNAMA continues to receive reports of arbitrary denial of justice in disputes over housing, land and property rights.

46. There are clear signs that freedom of expression is at risk, with continuing reports of arbitrary arrests, detention and intimidation of journalists. The Media Complaints Commission, under the Ministry of Information and Culture, lacks independence and is subject to political interference. There appears to be a general sentiment, even among some commissioners, that censorship in the current conditions of conflict and instability is justifiable.

47. Progress in implementing the Action Plan on Peace, Reconciliation and Justice, adopted by the Government in December 2005 and due for completion by end 2008, has been extremely limited. Political support for transitional justice in Afghanistan is almost non-existent. This was exemplified by the adoption of an amnesty law in March 2007 that seriously undermines the Action Plan. However, there are signs that some civil society groups are beginning to organize themselves around the issue of transitional justice. The recent discovery of mass graves in the outskirts of Kabul was a stark reminder of the extent of past abuses. UNAMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights brought in forensic experts from Physicians for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization, to carry out an assessment. In that regard, families of victims were mobilized to call for justice in respect of the missing and killed. Many Afghans feel that the time is not yet ripe for a full accounting of past abuses; it is also clear that the question cannot be indefinitely postponed. This is an issue on which Afghan civil society will have to take the lead. UNAMA continues to work not only with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, but also with civil society human rights groups, conducting capacity-building and training activities.

Gender

48. Strengthening women's participation and contributions to national peace and reconstruction remain a challenge, although some gains were noted during the reporting period. The ministries and government bodies concerned continue to

pursue the implementation of the gender-specific benchmarks of the Afghanistan Compact and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. Certain achievements have been reported, especially in the areas of access to health care, microfinance and education.

49. With regard to education, progress has been achieved in upgrading teachers' skills. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is providing support to rebuild schools and teaching facilities in Afghanistan. Over 9,000 female teachers have completed teacher training in the Provinces of Hirat, Jawzjan, Samangan, Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan and Ghazni. A further 225 female teachers have just started training in Hirat, while training for nearly 5,000 female teachers is ongoing in the Provinces of Farah and Balkh. It should also be noted, however, that, owing to the inadequate number of formal schools and qualified teachers, especially female teachers, an estimated 2 million children, 1.3 million of them girls, are not covered by the formal school system. Reports of attacks on schools and threats to teachers and students are plentiful, and risk undermining educational efforts and the gains achieved to date.

50. In pursuance of the benchmarks set by the Compact and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, the Government has completed the development of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan and has presented it to President Karzai, who is expected to submit it to his Cabinet for endorsement and implementation. The Action Plan is the result of extensive consultations with various sectors, including consultation workshops in five regions involving 375 government and civil society representatives from 26 provinces. The consultations were conducted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), UNAMA and civil society coalitions.

51. Raising the capacity of ministries to implement the Action Plan continues to be a great challenge. The Ministry's capacity to effectively lead, coordinate and monitor implementation needs to be strengthened. One recent success was the partnership that the Ministry established with the Civil Service Commission to strengthen women's leadership and participation in the civil service. Technical assistance was provided by UNIFEM.

52. Nonetheless, violence against women and discriminatory traditional practices continue to infringe on women's rights. There has been an overall increase in the reporting of violence against women across the country, including cases of self-immolation in the west and south and violence related to child and forced marriages. Reports of honour-related killings are also on the rise, and the failure of authorities to investigate and prosecute such cases remains a major concern.

53. The Government's gender equity goals in the Afghan National Development Strategy remain far from full realization owing to a lack of adequate access to education facilities, widespread violence against women, the murder of journalists and targeting of female activists, teachers, students and Government officials, and a weak political commitment to advancing women's issues.

B. Protection of civilians

54. Combat operations by both pro- and anti-governmental forces have resulted in the death or injury of large numbers of non-combatants, and the frequency of such incidents continues to rise. Against this backdrop, UNAMA has started to monitor closely the situation of civilians in armed conflict. The Mission has recorded over 1,000 civilian deaths from January to 31 August. In many instances, however, security conditions limiting the Mission's access to combat areas and the political sensitivity of the issue make it difficult to gather sufficient information to provide a comprehensive incident report.

55. Extensive advocacy regarding the importance of independent verification efforts of incidents involving civilian casualties has resulted in increased support for independent reporting. The leadership of international military forces has reacted by supporting structures to facilitate information-sharing with UNAMA, by announcing measures that will be taken to reduce the possibility of civilian casualties, and by conducting after-action reviews in cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan in cases where civilian casualties may have occurred. Many of these positive developments were manifest in the course of a workshop, led by UNAMA and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission on the protection of civilians, which was held in August, with the support of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. During the workshop, the most pressing protection challenges were reviewed, in an effort to lay the foundation for the development of a collaborative protection framework for Afghanistan.

VI. Afghanistan National Development Strategy, Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, and economic development

A. Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board

56. The Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board of the Afghanistan Compact, co-chaired by the Government of Afghanistan and UNAMA, has evolved into the primary coordination mechanism between the donor community and the Government in delivering progress in key areas and in particular on the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. While the interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy, presented at the London Conference in January 2006, continues to guide programming in key development sectors, the full Strategy is being finalized for release and implementation in mid-2008. It will articulate how the Compact goals will be achieved through a set of specific projects and programmes that will be costed, prioritized and budgeted. As noted above, subnational consultations were held in all provinces to ensure that the programmes in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy reflect real requirements at the provincial and district levels.

57. At the fifth meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, on 1 May, members took important decisions, such as commitments to aid effectiveness and the temporary increase of the police force ceiling from 62,000 to 82,000. The participation of the international community has increased, particularly in the

security sector, where efforts are ongoing to align ISAF campaign planning to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. The format of the Board has proved effective: a number of high-level working groups ensure that priority issues such as elections, refugees and corruption are addressed jointly and in a timely fashion. However, while some members of the international community have called for the Board to address a broader agenda and become more of a problem solver, Afghan ministerial engagement with the process remains uneven.

B. Economic development

58. The Afghan economy remains heavily dependent on international aid flows; it is also considerably distorted by the significant income flows from the illicit drug trade. Nonetheless, economic developments in the formal sector during the reporting period have been generally favourable, although preliminary estimates show a decline in the rate of economic growth from 14 per cent in 2005/06 to 8 per cent in 2006/07. Both inflation and exchange rates have remained generally stable.

59. On 9 July 2007, the International Monetary Fund and the International Development Association of the World Bank agreed that Afghanistan had taken the steps necessary to reach its "decision point" under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. As a result, it now qualifies for interim debt relief under the Initiative. In August 2007, the Russian Federation forgave 90 per cent of the $11.13 billion debt dating back to the Soviet era, also clearing the way for the Russian Federation to provide economic assistance to Afghanistan.

60. Efforts by both the Government and the international community to build a more prosperous Afghanistan through private sector development are continuing. These efforts were exemplified by the Enabling Environment Conference co-sponsored by the Aga Khan Development Network and held on 6 and 7 June, at which officials of the Government of Afghanistan, private sector figures, civil society leaders and donor community representatives agreed on a series of actions designed to create a favourable climate for the country's struggling private sector.

VII. Humanitarian situation and human security

A. Humanitarian situation

61. Humanitarian access has become a growing challenge; at least 78 districts have been rated by the United Nations as extremely risky, and therefore inaccessible to United Nations agencies. The delivery of humanitarian assistance has also become increasingly dangerous. The World Food Programme (WFP) and its implementing partners have experienced multiple attacks on food convoys, while several non-governmental organizations, and increasingly those carrying out the vital and dangerous task of demining, have had both national and international staff attacked or killed on road missions. The displacement of populations in the south owing to insecurity required the provision of humanitarian assistance in the form of food and non-food items to at least 4,000 families by United Nations agencies.

62. More positively, the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority, supported by UNAMA and UNDP, is improving its humanitarian response capacity.

In particular, the use of Government air assets has helped to both rescue and transport assistance to populations in dire need following flooding in Parwan Province.

63. There has also been commendable progress in the delivery of health care. Following the polio eradication campaign in 2006, there were only 9 confirmed polio cases in Afghanistan between January and July 2007, compared to 19 in the same period in 2006. Seven of the nine cases were in the south, where the security situation has limited the access of vaccination teams. In August, Afghanistan and Pakistan launched parallel campaigns to vaccinate over 40 million children against polio in both countries.

64. Pursuant to resolution 1746 (2007), UNAMA, with the assistance of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has continued to strengthen its humanitarian coordination role, including its disaster management capacity in regional offices and at the provincial level.

B. Human security

65. Following a bumper wheat harvest of 4.5 million tons, the Government is reporting a smaller food shortage for 2007, decreasing the amount of food supplies WFP will have to provide. The country will be 91 per cent self-sufficient in cereal production, estimated at 5.6 million tons (80 per cent of which is wheat). The Government should have a strategic stockpile of 20,000-40,000 tons, some of which will be pre-positioned for the winter in remote provinces.

66. Although food production increased in the reporting period (because of increased rainfall), access to food has actually decreased owing to the deteriorating security situation and poor infrastructure. Flooding and landslides have caused loss of life and property in vulnerable regions, exacerbating inaccessibility problems and requiring a response from United Nations agencies, which have assisted more than 200,000 families.

67. The number of children receiving an education in Afghanistan continued to rise during the reporting period, reaching 6.07 million, 2.17 million of whom were girls. This marks the highest number of children ever enrolled in school in Afghan history. UNICEF reports that attacks on schools from January to July in 2007 have been fewer than the same period in 2006, down from 68 to 27. However, the shooting of schoolgirls in June in the Province of Logar, in which three were killed and eight wounded, was the first time that schoolgirls had been deliberately targeted by anti-Government elements. By June, insecurity had forced 412 of 721 schools to close in the insurgency-affected Provinces of Kandahar, Uruzgan, Hilmand and Zabul. However, 72 schools had reopened by August.

68. Since 2000, Afghans have seen a steady drop in the infant mortality rate (3.5 per cent) and the maternal mortality rate (6.6 per cent), a trend which continues. Furthermore, a total of 82 per cent of the population is now covered by a basic package of health-care services. In addition, more than 132 million square metres of land have been cleared of mines, and 84 per cent of the ring road is now open.

69. The closure of the Kacha Gari refugee camp in Pakistan in July was responsible for 40 per cent of the approximately 91,000 refugees repatriated from Pakistan during the reporting period. On 22 August, faced with indications of

increased pressure on tens of thousands of refugees to leave Jalozai camp in a manner that would lead to a humanitarian crisis during the winter months. UNHCR successfully appealed to the Government of Pakistan to suspend the closure of this camp. Refugee returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran are at 4,500, suggesting that overall figures for Afghanistan for 2007 will be below last year's figure of 139,000, itself the lowest repatriation total since 2001. While the political profile of deportations from the Islamic Republic of Iran has been higher in 2007 than in 2006, the 170,000 recorded to date represents only a 14 per cent increase over 2006. Although reports indicate that most returning refugees have headed to the north, centre and west, lack of access for aid agencies to some areas of return is a concern, especially Farah Province, as well as the areas along the border with Pakistan.

VIII. Mission operations and support

70. Despite the challenges posed by increased violence in different parts of the country, UNAMA has been able to implement its mandate and complete its programmed expansion by opening offices in Day Kundi and Ghor Provinces, in April and July, respectively. The Mission's commitment to this expansion, which represents more than a doubling of the number of field offices in nine months, despite the spread of insecurity, has been welcomed by the Government, local communities and international partners. Over the coming months, UNAMA will focus on consolidating its current presence of eight fully integrated regional offices and nine provincial offices, ensuring that they are adequately staffed and supported.

71. The Mission's field presence will provide provincial government and non-government stakeholders with crucial capacity-building and coordination support (including in the security sector), as well as allow political outreach to disaffected groups, particularly in the south, through provision of good offices.

72. The Mission's engagement at the provincial level will be critical ahead of the launch of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy in March 2008. As a result, UNAMA will request an increase in the number of international posts for regional and provincial offices in its 2008 budget. The strong presence of international staff is particularly critical, given the increased work in support of political outreach, which necessarily requires a neutral and impartial approach that international staff can better provide. UNAMA will continue to rely on and work closely with national staff to facilitate sustainable capacity-building of Afghan human capital.

73. Security Council resolution 1746 (2007) reinforced certain dimensions of the Mission's engagement in Afghanistan. These new responsibilities — to promote a more coherent international engagement, to monitor and to engage in protection of civilians, and to develop synergies with ISAF — require additional resources and consolidation of capacity. Fulfilment of the strengthened mandate in this challenging security environment requires an increase in key personnel, including the police and military advisory units.

IX. Observations

74. **As the transition in Afghanistan comes under increasing strain owing to insurgency, weak governance and the narco-economy, the Government of Afghanistan, supported by the international community, will need to demonstrate political will by taking the bold steps necessary to recapture the initiative in each of these fields and restore confidence to the population in tangible ways. Without stronger leadership from the Government, greater donor coherence — including improved coordination between the military and civilian international engagement in Afghanistan — and a strong commitment from neighbouring countries, many of the security, institution-building and development gains made since the Bonn Conference may yet stall or even be reversed.**

75. **The most urgent priority must be an effective, integrated civilian-military strategy and security plan for Afghanistan. A coordinated military response is still needed to defeat insurgent and terrorist groups, but success in the medium term requires the engagement of communities and the provision of lasting security in which development can take place. To achieve that end, Afghan civilian and military leaders need to play a greater role in planning security operations and ensuring that military gains are consolidated with the provision of basic security by State institutions. At the same time, the different goals and movements within the insurgency present opportunities for political outreach and inclusion that must be seized.**

76. **A key to sustaining security gains in the long term is increasing the capability, autonomy and integrity of the Afghan National Security Forces, especially the Afghan National Police. The Government and its partners should develop, through the International Police Coordination Board, a unified vision for police reform and definitive structure for the national police that addresses the requirements of both law enforcement and counter-insurgency. It must also tighten financial and administrative accountability to end corruption and absenteeism in police ranks.**

77. **An effective, integrated and coherent Government-led subnational governance programme should be developed in partnership with the international community. The Government must be prepared to take painful decisions now to bring credibility to emerging institutions. It should avoid rotating underperforming officials into new positions, especially in the provinces, and replace them instead with effective administrators who both enjoy the confidence of the population, including tribal and religious leaders, and display a capacity to manage security, development and reconstruction processes in their provinces and districts. The extension of central authority and the stabilization of the country will be possible only if the Ministry of the Interior resolutely tackles corruption and improves popular perceptions of the police.**

78. **Building on the successes at the Conference on the Rule of Law in Afghanistan, the Government should finalize the justice sector strategy and begin implementation of the emerging national justice programme funded through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The Government should simultaneously address the apparent impunity enjoyed by those Government**

officials perceived to be abusing their offices. ISAF should support Government efforts to enforce the law and to implement the project for the disbandment of illegal armed groups in areas less affected by the insurgency.

79. The continued increase in opium production poses an increasingly grave threat to reconstruction and nation-building in Afghanistan. The Government must prioritize interdiction and bring drug traffickers to justice. The international community, supported by a strengthened UNODC, should unite behind a truly Afghan-led plan that moves beyond eradication efforts, which have proved ineffective in isolation.

80. The finalization and the future funding of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy must remain the overriding focus of donor engagement. Following its expected launch in March 2008, careful management of public expectations, follow-up at the provincial and district levels and further outreach that builds on the initial consultations will be crucial to the credibility of the Strategy. If the Strategy is to become an enduring vehicle for partnership between the Government and people of Afghanistan, it must be seen to deliver genuine results in response to priorities defined by the communities themselves.

81. The Government of Afghanistan has demonstrated its determination to contribute to regional security and prosperity by means of a series of major regional foreign policy achievements, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan peace jirga, the visit of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Kabul and President Karzai's participation in the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Bishkek. The Government must retain the trust of its neighbours by engaging constructively in bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including on the counter-narcotics and migration issues, and by building its capacity to manage and deepen complex bilateral relationships.

82. The recognition by Presidents Karzai and Musharraf at the peace jirga in Kabul of the cross-border nature of the insurgency provides a unique opportunity for their respective countries to pursue a joint strategy for cross-border peace and security, aimed at defeating extremism and terrorism in both countries.

83. National reconciliation will require agreement as to which insurgent leaders ought to be subject to military operations or law enforcement. It will also require both Afghanistan and Pakistan to undertake outreach and dialogue with those political forces capable of contributing to a peace process. It will be vital for all Member States to ensure implementation of the sanctions provided for under resolution 1267 (1999) and to include new insurgent and terrorist leaders on the consolidated list or remove them after reconciliation, as appropriate.

84. The Government of Afghanistan must investigate allegations of arbitrary detentions, inhumane treatment and torture of detainees by the authorities, and in particular by the National Directorate for Security. The Government should invite the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to visit Afghanistan as part of a cooperative process to combat arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment. The Government should renew

its political commitment towards the full implementation of the Action Plan on Peace, Reconciliation and Justice.

85. Presidential elections are due to be held in 2009. The upcoming cycle of elections will require urgent attention by both the Government and the National Assembly in order to ensure the adoption of the electoral law by the end of 2007. I reiterate my appeal to donors to meet the remaining shortfall from past Afghan elections and provide the resources necessary to support a new voter registry, capacity-building for the Independent Electoral Commission and planning and preparations for the elections themselves.

86. The United Nations will remain fully engaged in Afghanistan and continue to play its central and impartial coordinating role. I personally visited Afghanistan in July and shortly thereafter co-chaired the Conference on the Rule of Law in Afghanistan in Rome. I will, in addition, co-chair a high-level conference on Afghanistan in September with President Karzai, in the margins of the General Assembly. I shall continue to remain personally engaged in working with President Karzai and other partners to ensure success in Afghanistan.

87. Finally, I would also like to pay tribute to the dedicated efforts of my Special Representative and the staff of the United Nations in Afghanistan, who continue to carry out their mission under difficult and increasingly dangerous circumstances, and whose courage and commitment to Afghanistan have been essential to the progress achieved so far.